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## **‘Actors alongside and within us’: Ancient colorless stained glass and the making of young Belgium**

Against the backdrop of the archaeological movement and the aspiring new state of Belgium M.H. Vande Velde, King’s Prosecutor in Antwerp and president of the *Académie royale d’Archéologie de Belgique*, publishes in 1865 an elaborate illustrated treatise on a peculiar subject: the *colorless* stained glass windows of ancient monuments in the nation<sup>1</sup>. In the encyclopedic exposition great attention is paid to the historical parallel between technological and stylistic evolutions, tracing back a lineage to ancient Rome, of what were at the time considered as mere glass shards stuck together with lead lines. The rapidly growing production of figurative painted stained glass seriously threatened the survival of those lesser windows. Vande Velde pleads for the preservation of this heritage, pointing to its latent action on architecture (contributing to its *caractère*, referring to immaterial qualities) and on the user (contributing to light, mood and ornament). To this 19<sup>th</sup>-century study, which is easily situated in the specific historic context of Belgium but which at the same time appears atypical in content, we wish to apply the Thing Theory of Bill Brown. We will use related terminologies such as *actant* (Latour), *material vitalism* (Deleuze and Guattari) and *forceful agents* (Bennett) to help interpret the content and Vande Velde’s approach within the framework of material culture. By so doing we wish to shed new light on a small aspect of 19<sup>th</sup>-century national historiography which implicitly considers the un-stained-glass windows as *actors alongside and within us* (Bennett) and for this reason a worthy part of the cultural heritage exemplified by more spectacular objects which must set the example for the emerging ambitions of the new state of Belgium.

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<sup>1</sup> M. H. Vande Velde, “Les vitraux incolores des anciens monuments de Belgique”, *Annales de l’Académie d’Archéologie de Belgique*, 21, 1865, p. 5-40.